

Across the Great Divide: Imagining a Bridge between "Spirit Matters" and Corporate Culture

By Tsvi Blanchard

For some time now, I have been arguing that North American social policy discussions would benefit from the wisdom of inherited Jewish texts and historical documents.

Such texts are useful not only in internal, "Jewish" conversations, but in the many multicultural conversations which shape how we understand the symbols and institutions of the many diverse ethnic subcultures which are part of North American culture.

By now, this suggestion hardly seems radical. In fact, anyone familiar with American history knows that we have already begun the process of forging a "third language" that could integrate the language of inherited Jewish tradition with the language of a democratic North American culture. To do this, we have had to surrender any demand that Jewish sources be treated as "better" than other human wisdom traditions or belief systems.

To speak of a "culture," however, is not only to speak of ethnic or religious groups. All institutions, including economic organizations, have a culture. We are all familiar with the phrase "corporate culture." We are also familiar with contemporary, often quite heated, debates over the appropriate values for "the culture of corporate America". Think of how the following questions have been a part of important debates over the culture of corporations or our general corporate culture.

1. How should private interest be balanced with public good?
2. Should corporations be expected to have interests beyond profit-making?
3. If so, what are these interests?
4. How should public concerns, about the environment for example, find their way into the daily life of a corporation with its distinct cultural images, values and principles?

In his recently published book *Spirit Matters* (Walsch Books/Hampton Roads Publishing), Michael Lerner argues that we both can and should bring concepts and values from the inherited Jewish tradition into contemporary discussions about the culture of corporate America. He has argued forcefully that Judaism has bequeathed to us an important conception of "spirit" as the force for meaning in both personal and social life. It is this "spirit" which helps us to transcend the

moral limits of our own culture. For Lerner, "spirit" is literally everywhere in our world, powerfully creating and supporting the formation of caring and loving connections between human beings as well as between human beings and our environment.

What this suggests, argues Lerner, is that the culture of corporate America should be transformed from one centered almost exclusively on profit-making to one that values equally the fostering of love and caring among people, ethical standards and enhancing the environment. In the corporate culture Lerner envisions, these values would not be experienced as external restraints imposed on an essentially profit-oriented corporate culture. They would actually be built into the daily cultures of individual North American corporations.

Lerner believes that Jewish tradition teaches us that we must alter the bottom line of our corporations to include successfully increasing caring among people (at the very least those directly involved with the work of the corporation). Protecting our environment is another essential part of the new bottom line. Lerner suggests that if a corporation's culture fails to accomplish this new bottom line, its corporate charter should not be renewed. Whatever we may think of the specific politics of Spirit Matters, it is obvious that Michael Lerner is using language in ways which bring together Jewish tradition and the general spiritual concerns of contemporary North American culture.

If this seems odd to you, remember that for years now CLAL has been teaching that we work to create a shared North American culture that consciously treats individuals as created in the image of G-d. Remember as well that we at CLAL supported a corporation owned by one of our students when it included in its personnel code a paragraph asking its employees to let management know immediately if they felt they had not been treated with individual dignity. Whatever our differences about the methods and programs suggested in Spirit Matters, CLAL has always had a commitment to taking Jewish wisdom into the public conversations about culture in North America.

I am hoping that you will read both Spirit Matters and its critics. I am hoping that you will take their "conversation" seriously. As I have repeatedly argued, contemporary North American culture needs us to continue the search for a language in which to express fairly and sensitively our sense of the deepest insights our Jewish inheritance has to offer.